

University of Groningen

Letter to the editors

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Published in:
Schizophrenia Research

DOI:
[10.1016/j.schres.2018.06.055](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.schres.2018.06.055)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Final author's version (accepted by publisher, after peer review)

Publication date:
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bruins, J., Bartels-Velthuis, A. A., van Weeghel, J., Helmus, K., & Pijnenborg, G. H. M. (2018). Letter to the editors: Reducing stigmatizing attitudes in high school adolescents - a cluster RCT on the effectiveness of a schizophrenia documentary. *Schizophrenia Research*, 202, 408-409.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.schres.2018.06.055>

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Letter to the editors: Reducing stigmatizing attitudes in high school adolescents - a cluster RCT on the effectiveness of a schizophrenia documentary

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Words

Main document: 695

References: 9

Dear editors,

Public stigma can contribute to the challenges in finances, stable and suitable housing, employment and social relations that people with schizophrenia often experience (Morgan et al. 2017; Harrison and Gill 2010). Studies in the adult population have demonstrated the effectiveness of contact-based documentaries in reducing social distance and negative emotions towards people with mental illness (Thonon et al. 2016). However, adolescents might be a more susceptible target group for anti-stigma interventions, because stigmatizing attitudes and early symptoms of mental illness often begin to form in childhood and early adolescence (Chisholm et al. 2016). When adolescents receive normalizing information about psychotic experiences, it could potentially increase their understanding towards people with mental illness and become part of their world view. We aimed to investigate whether a documentary about a young man with schizophrenia could reduce the stigmatizing attitudes of high school adolescents in the Netherlands.

In total, 89 adolescents (five classes) from one Dutch community high school were cluster-randomized by class to either the experimental (n=58) or the control group (n=31). Participating students were unaware of the study aims and received no information about schizophrenia or the aims of the study from the researchers prior to participation. They were fully informed about the study aims after the postmeasurement had taken place. Mean age was 16.3 years (SD=0.49) and 52.8% was male. Duration of participation was 45 minutes, during which familiarity with schizophrenia (baseline) and stigmatizing attitudes (baseline and post intervention) were assessed and a 12-minute documentary was shown. The experimental documentary focused on normalizing psychotic experiences and it featured a 16-year-old male adolescent with schizophrenia, who spends the day with a female Dutch celebrity ('Are you Crazy?!' In Dutch: 'Ben jij gek?!'). The control group watched a scene from 'March of the Penguins' of equal length. This study was approved by the internal Ethical Board of the University of Groningen and all participants signed an informed consent.

Stigmatizing attitudes were measured with the Mental Illness Stigma Scale (Day et al. 2007), with higher scores representing stronger stigmatizing attitudes. We divided the 28-item questionnaire into two parallel lists (scores range 14-98), to measure preintervention and postintervention stigmatizing attitudes. Familiarity was measured with the adapted Level of Contact Report (Corrigan et al. 2005) for high school students. The ranking list states increasing levels of familiarity, varying from "I have never seen or met a person with schizophrenia" (score = 0) to "I have schizophrenia" (score = 7). There were no baseline differences in characteristics, stigmatizing attitudes or familiarity with schizophrenia between students in the experimental and control group (see Table 1).

Mean baseline stigmatizing attitudes were 49.4 (SD=9.4). A repeated measures ANOVA showed a significant effect for watching the documentary ($F(1,81)= 29.81, P<0.001$), with a significantly larger decrease in stigmatizing attitudes of participants in the experimental group than in the control group. The overall effect size (Cohen's d), based on the standardized mean differences in both groups, for watching the documentary on stigmatizing attitudes was 1.25 (SE=0.25). Although the results of previous video-based anti-stigma interventions were ambiguous (Stuart 2006; Pinto-Foltz et al. 2011; Thonon et al. 2016), our current study suggests a contact-based documentary can be an effective and appropriate tool to reduce stigmatizing attitudes in high school adolescents.

The majority of our study sample reported little to no prior interaction with people with schizophrenia. The mean score on the Level of Contact Report was 1.15 (SD=1.4). Eighty percent had only seen a person with schizophrenia on television or had no contact at all, 12% reported contact with a person with schizophrenia at least once and only 8% knew a person with schizophrenia in their personal network (e.g. a classmate, friend or relative). When actual contact with people with schizophrenia is so limited, all information regarding this topic comes from secondary sources, most likely the media. Since media often portray schizophrenia in a negative manner, this may have strongly influenced the adolescents' perception of people with this disorder (Locke 2011). Showing documentaries or television programs that accurately portray schizophrenia and incorporating this normalizing material in standard high school education programs, as a counterpart to negative stereotypical broadcasts, can help to reduce the public stigma of adolescents.

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